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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 PARIS 000203

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [KPAL](#) [IS](#) [FR](#)

SUBJECT: GOF OFFICIALS UPBEAT ON PALESTINIAN ELECTIONS, BUT
DOWNBEAT ON UK-PROPOSED LONDON MEETING

REF: A. 04 PARIS 8951

[1](#)B. 04 PARIS 7567

Classified By: Acting Political Counselor Paul Mailhot, reasons 1.4 (b)
and (d).

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: GoF officials are stressing to us privately their high degree of satisfaction with Palestinian elections, but express concern that the post-elections follow-up will focus too much on what is demanded of the Palestinian side without pressing Israel to make gestures to the new Palestinian leadership. The French stress that they would like to see more rapid movement toward final status issues than the U.S. and UK envision, but claim that they have no initiatives in this regard. French officials privately question the utility of the UK-proposed conference on Palestinian reform, which they will support though they view it as duplicative and would have preferred an international conference with Israeli participation. In an effort to re-engage on Middle East peace issues, FM Barnier will visit Israel and the Occupied Territories January 30-31 for meetings with senior Israeli and Palestinian officials. End summary.

[1](#)2. (SBU) Senior GoF officials offered effusive congratulations January 10 to Mahmoud Abbas on his election victory and stressed the GOF's determination to work with the Palestinians, Israelis and international community to seize the window of opportunity on Middle East peace. FM Barnier, in January 10 press comments, described the election results as a "victory for democracy" and a "first victory for peace" and stressed GoF readiness to help Abbas proceed with necessary reforms and prepare for Gaza withdrawal. Barnier also offered a positive assessment of PM Sharon, repeating his earlier description of the Gaza disengagement plan as "courageous" (ref b) and declaring that Sharon was up to the historic task now before him. Barnier also repeated his earlier statement (ref a) that the "test" of the transatlantic relationship would be our collective capacity to relaunch the Middle East peace process. Meanwhile, President Chirac, in a congratulatory letter to Abbas made public by the Elysee, commended Abbas for his courage in promoting democracy and rule of law, and pledged that France would be by his side "more than ever" in the quest for peace. Chirac also encouraged Abbas to visit Paris at the earliest opportunity.

[1](#)3. (C) In a discussion with us on Palestinian and Lebanon-related issues (septel) January 10, MFA DAS-equivalent for Egypt/Levant issues Christian Jouret stressed GoF satisfaction with the January 9 election results. Jouret praised Palestinian handling of the electoral process, which, with the plurality of candidates, showed that the Palestinians were ahead of other Arab governments in building a democratic foundation for governance. Jouret also commended Israeli facilitation of the elections as "pretty good."

[1](#)4. (C) After briefly discussing the election results, Jouret raised the UK-proposed meeting on Palestinian reforms, to take place in March. Jouret questioned the utility of the London meeting, which the GoF viewed as duplicative of other international efforts, such as December meetings in Oslo which had already reaffirmed the international commitment to help the Palestinians. Although the GoF would "go along" with the UK proposal, France would have much preferred for the London meeting to be a true international conference, as called for in the roadmap, with Israeli participation. Jouret quipped that the GoF was a fan of international conferences in general, as the U.S. was well aware in the Iraq context. He added that GoF interpreted the London meeting largely as a UK effort to boost Blair's domestic standing, and some in the GoF viewed Blair as having become the U.S. "spokesman" in pressing the Palestinians to do more. (Comment: The UK embassy has expressed private frustration to us over their efforts to consult with the French on the proposed London meeting, and told us the French were annoyed by the manner in which Blair announced the meeting during his recent trip to the region. End comment.) Jouret summed up that the GoF wanted to move faster than the U.S. and UK towards final status issues; he stressed, nonetheless, that the GoF had no initiatives to move the process forward. France remained concerned that waiting for the Palestinians to complete reforms that would take years to achieve, in the absence of gestures from the Israeli side, would leave the

process open to disruption from Hamas and others. The GoF also remained worried, despite its positive public comments on PM Sharon and his Gaza disengagement plan, that "Gaza first would be Gaza last," and that the GoI would remain content to withdraw from Gaza and halt the process there.

15. (C) Probed for details on what new initiatives France might take to help the Palestinians, Jouret offered few specifics. He stressed that the Solana Plan remained the framework for European engagement to facilitate the Gaza withdrawal, and said that France would like to do "something." He added that Israeli resistance to a European role on security remained an impediment to further European engagement, and claimed that recent comments by PM Blair suggested that the U.S. was the only potential player on Palestinian security, as though Europe did not exist.

16. (C) On a more positive note, Jouret reported that FM Barnier would visit Israel and the Occupied Territories January 30-31 to meet with senior officials, including PM Sharon, FM Shalom, Vice Minister Peres, President Abbas, FM Shaath and PLC Speaker Fattouh. Jouret stressed that the GoF felt that it was the right time to re-engage with the parties and quipped that Barnier was perhaps the last European FM to travel to the region in the wake of Arafat's death. On this point, he said that Barnier felt that he could wait to travel to the region to greet the new Palestinian leadership, since France had played such a major role in Arafat's final days. Jouret compared the French attitude with Spanish FM Moratinos, whom he described as nearly seeking to "kiss Arafat's cadaver" during a December 2004 visit to the region. Jouret added that the Barnier trip would also serve the GoF's long-standing objective of improving bilateral relations with Israel, which was the focus of a Barnier visit to Israel in October 2004. Two weeks after the Barnier trip, FM Shalom planned to visit Paris in mid-February to inaugurate, alongside the French FM, the new Israeli Embassy chancery building in Paris.

Leach